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Back in the Hill's doghouse

Good news for the Soviet KGB. Once more the CIA is in the congressional doghouse, a victim this time of White House plots and counterplots which have yet to be explained in any rational fashion.

What is so disheartening about the present CIA crisis is that it does not seem to be one of its own making as was the previous crisis in the mid-1970s, when one could talk about the intelligence agency's self-inflicted wounds. At the time, the Senate Church committee and the House Pike committee went after the CIA hammer and tong and really brought out some gamey misadventures.

These exposes were followed by restrictions on CIA activities, especially on covert action and the installation of two congressional Select Oversight Committees. The two oversight committees were a great improvement over the eight panels which previously had asserted their right to oversee CIA activities.

It was during that period of congressional CIA probes that the directorship became a revolving door. Between the end of the Nixon administration and the end of the Carter administration, there were five directors — Richard Helms, James Schlesinger, William Colby, George Bush, and Adm. Stansfield Turner — and the inevitable shakeups, especially in the strategic counterintelligence force.

Agency stability followed with President Reagan's appointment of William Casey as director. By all accounts, his early years as director went smoothly, although he seemed never to have been able to keep personal appointees around him for very long. At times, Mr. Casey was criticized for being too tolerant of the CIA bureaucracy. Overall, however, he was a strong director because of his past intelligence experience and close friendship with Mr. Reagan.

With Mr. Casey's forced resignation due to ill health and long hos-

pitalization, his successor-designate, Robert Gates, has landed in the midst of another crisis, one which well-informed sources say has paralyzed the agency.

Mr. Gates, for whom there is high praise among those who know him personally and professionally, is being made the scapegoat by Congress for what may or may not have been CIA derelictions under Mr. Casey's directorship. Even policy memoranda, so-called "think pieces" prepared by CIA officers and intended to give the president options in specific emergencies, are being used to beat Mr. Gates over the head. Does Congress want conformity among CIA officers or should they in specific cases be allowed to think the unthinkable, such as selling arms to Iran?

In the midst of all these swirling controversies, one source said, "The CIA is doing nothing. Nothing. How can they?"

Initiatives, which are the purpose of an intelligence agency, presently are said to be slow in coming. Agency executives are being cautious and watchful as Congress moves into high gear for a spectacle that is certain to drag out into next year's presidential campaign as some kind of issue.

Meanwhile, there has been a noticeable lull in terrorist activity, and for good reason. Some observers of the Middle East believe that the shadowy hijacking and kidnapping rings have agreed to dampen their terrorist ardor for the moment. The reason? To avoid giving President Reagan an opportunity to re-assert himself through a dramatic counter-terrorist strike, which would help him regain his standing in U.S. public opinion polls.

Such a lull in terrorist activity is, of course, good news for Americans abroad, and perhaps even for foolhardy Americans who are still in Beirut. The more important question is how long American security can be safeguarded when what should be its first line of defense, namely its major intelligence agency, lies trussed up like a turkey ready for the chopper.

Congress has an undeniable right and a duty to investigate the CIA. But what about the duties and functions of the agency, especially its counter-intelligence branch?

The two chairmen of the oversight committees should issue a statement assuring the public, if it is true, that the present investigations of the CIA and the hearings on Mr. Gates's desirable nomination as director will not do long-term damage to the agency.

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